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ABSTRACT

Corrective reading assessment and instruction in middle and secondary schools are based on students' weaknesses rather than on their strengths and bear little relationship to the tasks of content area reading. Two premises serve as a rationale for a positive approach to middle and secondary school reading instruction: (1) the majority of students who "seem" to need corrective reading instruction do not need it, and (2) the majority of students who do need corrective reading instruction do not need the kind they are getting. Elementary school reading instruction separates reading into a series of skills, while middle and secondary school reading tasks are holistic in nature. Elementary school instruction concentrates on phonics, but students often do not have the background knowledge to construct familiar meanings out of new concepts and vocabulary, even when their decoding skills are strong. The key to easing the transition from elementary to secondary texts is advanced instruction in reading-reasoning processes in content classrooms, and, for those who still need it, corrective instruction that builds on their strengths: experience, language facility, decoding skills, curiosity, and the capacity to reason. (HTH)

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A Network of Secondary School
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Network Report #3

A POSITIVE APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT AND CORRECTION OF READING DIFFICULTIES IN MIDDLE AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A Position Paper by

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A Positive Approach to Assessment and Correction of Reading Difficulties in Middle and Secondary Schools

Corrective reading instruction in middle and secondary schools has taken on a decidedly negative character over the years for a variety of reasons. Both the assessments and the instruction provided in corrective reading classes are primarily based on students' weaknesses rather than on their strengths. Further, assessment and instruction in these classes bear little relationship to the reading tasks presented in other instructional settings where reading is required. Consequently, one can find scant evidence of positive transfer of gains purportedly made in corrective reading classes to regular classroom reading performance.

It is our intent in this paper to examine the roots of this negative approach to corrective reading and to present an alternative: a positive, non-deficit approach to reading instruction in middle and secondary schools. This approach is based on the contention that a better understanding of the nature of reading comprehension processes and of the sophisticated reading tasks required of students at this level will lead to a new conceptualization of reading strengths and

weaknesses. Our position is based on considerable experience working with teachers and students in real classroom situations, on the growing body of research evidence that supports an interactive model of reading comprehension, and on consensual intuitions regarding instructional processes to support such a model.

Back to Basics: A Non-professional Solution to a Non-existent Problem.

In spite of increasing evidence that today's students are reading as well as or better than their counterparts of 10, 20, and 30 years ago (NAEP, 1975; Farr, Tuinman, and Rowls, 1975; Farr, Fay and Negley, 1978; Farr and Blomenberg, 1979; Micklos, 1980), the media event of a reading crisis persists. Increasing public criticism tends to make reading educators very nervous; so nervous, in fact, that many have accepted the media event as reality. Consequently, they have ignored what is really needed in reading instruction at middle and secondary school levels in order to continue to do, and then redo with greater urgency, what they are already doing well. Though there is ample evidence that students are learning the basic decoding and comprehension skills (NAEP, 1975; Farr, Fay, and Negley, 1978), educators willingly consign a whole nation of children "back to basics" without professional consideration of the complexities of reading comprehension and of the kind of instruction that is really needed to enhance students' reading achievement.

Make no mistake; the authors are not against basic reading instruction (although we are sometimes troubled by the way it is conducted). What we are against is the persistent recycling of large numbers of students through basic word recognition and literal comprehension skills because of a misinterpretation of the difficulties students encounter in reading their content area texts.

This deficit recycling is especially evident in corrective reading classes. Reading teachers, most of whom were trained to teach elementary reading skills, tend to lock middle and secondary school students into an elementary skills-deficit model. This type of instruction is based on a skills-sufficiency theory that promotes the idea that if a certain set and sequence of skills are learned sufficiently, comprehension will take care of itself. The extent to which such instruction persists is a measure of how the profession has ignored the recent body of evidence indicating that reading comprehension occurs as a complex interaction among all the knowledge systems operating within the reader--conceptual, social, linguistic, experiential, etc.--and all the linguistic systems operating in the text--grapho-phonemic, syntactic, semantic (see for example Adams and Bruce, 1980; Adams and Collins, 1979; Anderson et al., 1977; Kamil, 1978; Rumelhart, 1977; Santa and Hayes, 1981). The very nature of the more sophisticated reading tasks required of students in middle and secondary schools creates problems not amenable to the simple application

of sets and sequences of skills. The fact that many of our students survive the transition from learning to read to reading to learn without appropriate supportive instruction is testimony to their intelligence and their reading-reasoning power.

Basic Premises for Positive Reading Improvement.

There are two premises that help in developing the rationale for a positive approach to middle and secondary school reading instruction:

1. The majority of students who seem to need corrective reading instruction in middle and secondary schools don't.
2. The majority of students who do need corrective reading instruction don't need the kind they're getting.

The first premise is based on the conviction that all students should have the benefit of reading instruction in every classroom where reading is required, and that reading strategies should be taught simultaneously with the content of the subject being taught. If this were done, very few students would need corrective instruction. Unfortunately, we generally abandon the teaching of reading at the very point where students need to integrate the skills gleaned from basic reading instruction with their knowledge, their experience and their reasoning power to address more complex reading comprehension tasks (Nelson, 1980).

The easiest way to illustrate the problem is to compare the direct teaching of reading skills as it is done in the majority of elementary schools with the functional teaching of the reading process as it should be done in middle and secondary schools. (It must be noted that this dichotomy cannot be drawn where reading is taught as a functional holistic process from the outset.) The comparison will be made on three dimensions: 1) separation vs. integration of skills; 2) word recognition vs. word acquisition; 3) reconstruction of meaning vs. construction of new meanings.

Separation vs. Integration.

Elementary school reading programs generally separate reading into a multiplicity of skills. This fragmentation is based on the notion that students can learn to read better if the whole process is broken into separate pieces and each of those pieces carefully taught. It is assumed that when students have learned all of the parts they will be able to reassemble them into a holistic reading process. It is interesting to note that there is no set or sequence of reading skills that can be supported on the basis of research. Most skill sequences are based on common sense considerations; however, when both materials and tests are constructed around these skill sequences, the results in terms of students' basic reading achievement are reasonably good.

In middle and secondary schools, reading tasks are holistic in nature, requiring the simultaneous use of many skills. The

content of the material determines how skills must be integrated to comprehend it. Students need a different kind of reading instruction that provides strategies for integrating and applying previously acquired skills to new content. Because some students have difficulty in making this transition, it is assumed that they lack the basic skills. As a result, they are repeatedly recycled through separate skills instruction. This process, though it may lead to increased scores on skill oriented reading tests, generally fails to solve the problem of integrating and transferring skills to the increasingly sophisticated reading tasks assigned in content area reading classrooms.

In some cases, this "corrective" reading process exacerbates the problem it is intended to solve. First, it labels students as "problem readers" causing them new problems with self-concept and social relationships. Second, it takes time away from content classes causing students to fall further behind their peers. Finally, and most important for reading comprehension, it leads to heavier and heavier reliance on graphic data to the detriment of the necessary integration of graphic and experiential data that is required for creative construction of meaning.

Word Recognition vs. Word Acquisition.

Elementary schools concentrate on word recognition skills so that students can re-cognize words that are already in their own lexicons. For example, students are taught phonics so that they can attempt to pronounce, in left to right sequence, the sounds of a word to gain clues to its recognition as a word they

already know. Given that this process has questionable efficacy even for known words, it seems too obvious to set in print that students will have difficulty using their phonics skills to recognize words that they would not recognize even if they could pronounce them.

Take the sentence, As we rode the old-fashioned carousel, the sounds of the calliope surrounded us. If the word calliope were not in the students' personal lexicons, they would not only fail to recognize it, they would most likely mispronounce it as well. While the context provides some support for the meaning of the word, it could as easily mean crowd, engine, carnival, amusement park, children, etc. Further, the presence of the word calliope in the text would probably cause students, reading orally, to also miscue on other words in the sentence because of the anxiety produced by anticipation of the unknown word.

Failure on the part of teachers to recognize the reasons for the students' difficulties at this point could lead to incorrect assessment of the problems as a lack of decoding skills. While students may appear to lack these basic reading skills, they are simply unable to apply the skills they possess to the more difficult reading tasks required of them in content area textbooks which contain new concept words and technical vocabulary that may be entirely unfamiliar to them. It should be no surprise, then, that some students have difficulty reading these texts independently. What is needed is not a recycling through skill-drill word recognition activities, but a program

of instruction in each content classroom that 1) provides experience with the new vocabulary of the content before students are expected to re-cognize it in their reading, and 2) provides positive strategies for acquisition of new vocabulary within the context of the content.

Reconstruction vs. Creative Construction.

Meaning resides in the experience of the reader. What the reader brings to the text, both in terms of linguistic experience and of world experience, determines, to a large extent, what the reader takes from the text. The importance of the reader's background has been noted by Adams and Bruce (1980, p. 38):

> To say that background knowledge is often used, or is useful in comprehending a story is misleading. It suggests that a reader has the option of drawing on background knowledge to enhance the comprehension process, but that he or she might just as well do without such frills -- as if there were a reading process separate from the drawing-on-background-knowledge process.
>
> In fact reading comprehension involves the construction of ideas out of pre-existing concepts. A more correct statement of the role of background knowledge would be that comprehension is the use of prior knowledge to create new knowledge. Without prior knowledge, a complex object, such as a text, is not just difficult to interpret; strictly

speaking, it is meaningless.

Elementary school reading programs recognize the importance of background knowledge in reading when they almost invariably use text materials containing vocabulary, facts, concepts, and values that operate within the conceptual framework of the elementary pupils' experience. Stories about home, family, pets, play, domestic animals, etc. are the mainstay of elementary readers. Pupils are taught word recognition and comprehension skills so that they can reconstruct, from the text, ideas and meanings already within the realm of their experience.

By the end of the elementary grades, with good instruction, most pupils can successfully use their reading skills to recognize common words and to reconstruct familiar meanings. The mistake lies in the assumption that they can automatically transfer these skills to the reading of textbooks that contain uncommon vocabulary, unknown facts, unfamiliar concepts, and unusual values. That some students do make this transfer with apparent ease is testimony to their intelligence and reasoning power; that many have difficulty should be no surpise to educators.

It's sometimes necessary, however, to use very unusual illustrations to help proficient adult readers to recognize the difficulty. Take, as an example, the following sentence: <u>There's a bear in a plain brown wrapper doing flip-flops around 78 and passing out green stamps</u>. This is a perfectly good

English sentence. It has nouns, verbs, adjectives, phrases, clauses, etc. Even the words are all familiar. However, anyone not familiar with CB radio language would be very unlikely to comprehend the author's message, no matter how well he or she had learned the basic reading skills. To understand the message, both the context of the message and the technical vocabulary must reside in the experience of the reader. The reader must recognize the sentence as a CB communication, both experientially and syntactically, and must recognize the special and unusual meanings of the words when used within this context. The reader who can tap this experience can readily comprehend the message as meaning that a state trooper in an unmarked car is cruising back and forth on the highway around mile marker 78 and issuing tickets to speeders. The reader without this CB experience cannot comprehend no matter how well he or she applies decoding or basic comprehension skills.

The same kind of thing happens when students encounter content area text materials containing facts, concepts, and values that are outside the realm of their experience. They have difficulty comprehending not because they lack decoding and comprehension skills, but because they lack the experience necessary to bring meaning to the text. Even where concepts are somewhat familiar to students, they may lack enough elaboration of the experience to comprehend fully. In reading the sentence, After finishing our mousse, Jean went to the check-room and I passed out tribute to all the outstretched palms,

most adults would immediately recognize the setting as a restaurant and the action as finishing dessert, retrieving the wraps, and tipping the waiters. They have developed full and elaborate restaurant schemata from many restaurant experiences and can tap these experiences to bring meaning to the message. But what about the student whose only experience of a restaurant is McDonald's or Burger King? Will this student recognize the word mousse or even be able to pronounce it? Will he or she be able to answer comprehension questions such as: What does "tribute" mean in this sentence? or What are the characters in the story doing? Will the student even recognize that the action is occurring in a restaurant? Probably not; and to make matters worse, when students are asked to read aloud from a text that they are having difficulty comprehending, they tend to miscue and stumble, even on familiar words, giving the impression that word recognition skills are lacking. Consequently, both students and teachers become frustrated, and students are consigned to "corrective" classes where they are again recycled through the skills.

Advanced Instruction is the Key

What reading educators must recognize is that the transition from reading materials containing common words and familiar concepts to content area text books containing uncommon vocabulary and unfamiliar concepts involves a change in the reading process from recognition of known words to acquisition of new words, from reconstruction of meaning out of experience

to creative construction of new meanings and new experience. This process involves reasoning, reasoning from what is known to what is new, reasoning in, around, and beyond the text material (Herber, 1978).

The key to easing the transition is instruction -- not instruction in special reading classes where students are recycled through decoding and comprehension skills, but instruction that occurs in every class where reading is required -- in literature, in science, in mathematics, in the social sciences, and in other subjects as appropriate.

Premises Revisited

Returning to the first premise, that the majority of students who seem to need corrective reading instruction in middle and secondary schools don't, it is our contention, based on the previous discussion, that if, instead of abandoning the teaching of reading at the end of the elementary grades, advanced instruction in reading-reasoning processes were provided in each content classroom, the majority of students would be able to integrate the skills they possess, access new vocabulary, and grow in the creative construction of meaning. Such advanced instruction would include the following:

1. Strategies that tap pupils' experience related or analogous to new concepts to provide conceptual frameworks for integrating new ideas with prior experience.
2. Strategies that build new concepts or examine

conflicting values before students are expected to comprehend them in reading.

3. Strategies that provide students' experience with the technical or uncommon vocabulary of the content area before they are expected to recognize that vocabulary in their reading.
4. Feed-forward strategies that emphasize predicting and anticipating meanings on the basis of prior experience.
5. Strategies that guide and support students' reading at the literal, interpretive, and applied levels of comprehension (Herber, 1978).
6. Strategies that build positively on students' skills instead of recycling them.
7. Strategies that provide opportunities for interaction among students for pooling of experience, discussion of ideas, clarification of concepts, multiple recitation of vocabulary, facts, concepts, and values, and to take advantage of the benefits of peer-tutoring (Nelson, 1980).
8. Strategies that guide and support creative reasoning through and beyond the text material.

As teachers provide instructional support during students' transition from learning to read to reading to learn, middle and secondary schools find far fewer students who need corrective reading instruction. This leads to our second premise, the majority of students who do need corrective reading

instruction in middle and secondary schools don't need the kind they're getting.

Assume for a moment that subject teachers are trained in methods and strategies for teaching reading simultaneously with the content of their subject area and are providing such instruction. Even so, a few of their students may need additional help in reading. It is for these students that a corrective reading program is established. It serves as a supplement to the instruction they receive in the regular content area classrooms. As a supplement, it should be consistent in purpose, function, and definition. Unfortunately, much of what goes on in corrective reading classes bears little relationship to the reading tasks required in regular classrooms. Once again, there seems to be a lack of application of what we know about reading comprehension to the instructional setting.

Comprehension is the primary objective in reading; all other objectives have to do with accomplishing comprehension, e.g., phonics, structural analysis, etc., or with using comprehension, e.g., summarizing, outlining, etc. (Goodman, 1970). As stated earlier, comprehension occurs as a complex interaction of all the knowledge systems operating within the reader and all the linguistic systems operating in the text. Why, then, do corrective reading programs focus so heavily on a skills deficit model wherein students' weaknesses become the center of interest while the strengths are virtually ignored? Even more disturbing

is the tendency to concentrate the students' attention on graphic cues without the necessary integration of graphic and experiential data required for construction of meaning.

Examine, for example, the oral reading protocol in Figure 1. It represents the oral reading of a fifth grade boy we'll call David. After listening to a tape recording of David's reading of this and several other paragraphs with similar miscues, thirty-two reading teachers were given a checklist with items of suggested corrective options ranging from heavy decoding emphasis to heavy meaning emphasis items. Not surprisingly, the most checked item was: A structured review of phonics with emphasis on blending sounds in the middle of words. Among the least checked items was: Lessons that stress anticipation of meaning from experience. The teachers seemed so attuned to reading as a decoding or word calling process that they failed to notice the most disturbing element of David's oral reading -- that he does not recognize that reading is a process of creating meaning from print. Consequently, many of the teachers would engage David in an iatrogenic process, one that makes the problem worse by treating it. David is already relying too heavily on graphic cues. Another recycling through phonics will only exacerbate the problem. When David fails to stop at the end of the first sentence to express confusion or make corrections, it should be recognized at once that he is not in touch with the primary objective in reading -- comprehension.

15A
FIGURE

ORAL READING PROTOCOL

(DAVID N.)

TOM AND NED liver nea ~~LIVE NEAR~~ A LARGE CITY Park ~~PARK.~~ THEY OFTEN Visit ~~VISIT~~ IT WITH THEIR PLAYMATES. IN THE PARK ARE MANY shades ~~SHADY~~ MAPLE TREES. THERE IS A forest ~~PLEASANT~~ PICNIC GROUND ON THE HILL, AND THE VALLEY BELOW HAS A PRETTY LITTLE found ~~POND.~~ THE GIRLS ALWAYS ENJOY WATCHING THE BOYS WHILE THEY SAIL THEIR TINY BOATS IN THE WATER. MOTHER AND FATHER ENJOY S PICNICS IN THE PARK.

Paragraph 4, Gilmore Oral Reading Test, John V. Gilmore, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. New York, 1951 (out of print)

What the teachers did not know was that David, according to his records, had been recycled through phonics at least three times and had developed the learned helplessness that one so often sees in long term corrective reading students (Thomas, 1979). Once his phonics knowledge was viewed as a strength rather than as a weakness, and he began to work on exercises that stressed reading for meaning using his strength in phonics as a tool (e.g., using cloze process with phonic clues), he began to make rapid progress.

It is recognized, of course, that some students do have skill deficiences. What is being suggested is that skills are not sufficient to meet the reading needs of middle and secondary school students. Consistency between the corrective reading program and the regular reading program calls for instruction not only to correct real skill deficiencies, but to integrate the skills with the use of strategies that parallel instruction in content classrooms -- instruction that focuses on students strengths rather than on their (presumed) weaknesses.

There are several sources of strength in students who have need for corrective reading: experience, language facility, decoding skills, curiosity, capacity to reason.

Experience. By the time students reach the middle and secondary school grades, they have accumulated a rich store of experiences. This experiential strength may not be literally and directly related to what is studied in school. However, if analyzed in reference to broadly based concepts and principles that are worthy of study, students' experiences have a high degree of relevance.

A positive approach to corrective reading utilizes students' experiential strength in the study of important ideas. Instructional strategies are available to help students make connections between their own experiences and what they are studying in school. They learn that there are many dimensions to a single experience and their own experience can enrich others even as, through reading, their own can be enriched.

Language facility. Students have linguistic strengths. They understand language and can use it to communicate with others. At least intuitively, they recognize that language communication is not just the product of a set of specific skills but is a unified process used as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself.

A positive approach to corrective reading builds on this familiarity with language and the ability to communicate with language. Instructional strategies are available to help students to understand that each subject has its own

special language and that once they learn the vocabulary they can communicate as easily in that language as in their more familiar, general language. These strategies acquaint students with special language from different disciplines and support its use as students discuss ideas that are central to an understanding of those disciplines.

Decoding skills. By the time students reach middle and secondary schools they usually have had considerable exposure to phonics. They recognize that there is a relationship between sounds and symbols and can use their phonetic knowledge to pronounce phonetically-regular words in meaningful context. Further intensive phonics instruction at this level does not appear to be as beneficial as the use of a whole language approach that places emphasis on the use of syntactic and semantic cues as well as on graphic cues (Otto, 1979). Indeed, there is evidence of a more dominant use of semantic and grammatical cues by high achieving, comprehending readers. According to Otto in a review of approaches to remedial reading for adolescents, instruction which optimizes student use of syntactic and semantic cues appears to facilitate student achievement more consistently than isolated phonics instruction. This is probably because basic phonics skills lose their efficacy as reading materials advance in difficulty, containing words and concepts beyond the realm of student experience (Spache, 1976).

A positive approach to corrective reading acknowledges the decoding skills that students bring to middle and secondary schools and builds on those skills rather than overemphasizing

them. Instructional strategies are available to help students realize that decoding is only a means to an end and that the purpose of reading is to comprehend the intended message.

Curiosity. Students are naturally curious and inquisitive beings and with that curiosity comes an ability to speculate, to hypothesize, and to set purposes. This curiosity motivates students to explore their personal environments and themselves more than to explore the unknown concepts presented in the various curricula studied in middle and secondary schools. Teachers, focusing on the latter rather than the former, conclude that students "are not interested in learning."

A positive approach to corrective reading draws heavily on students' natural curiosity. Instructional strategies are available to tap into their ability to hypothesize or predict, their interest in problem solving, their motivations for confirmation of their speculations, their need to know about concurring opinions. Through these strategies students develop a need for reading to satisfy their need to know.

Capacity to reason. While we recognize that students are not equally endowed with the capacity to reason, we believe the basic capacity is present in all. It is not our function as teachers to teach our students "to think." They already can do that. Rather, it is our function to teach them "how to think," how to use their reasoning powers to the maximum. Even students who have difficulty comprehending what they are reading have the ability to reason about the information once

they acquire it - either through reading or by alternate means. Lack of reading skill does not automatically mean lack of reasoning skill. Indeed, the latter can be used to promote the former.

A positive approach to corrective reading builds on students' ability to reason and does not withold the utilization of this natural capacity until the more unnatural act of reading is fully developed. Instructional strategies are available to stimulate students' reasoning power. Coupled with their natural curiosity about the world around them, this reasoning power creates in them a need to know that makes reading a natural and productive means to an end rather than a rather dull end in itself.

Conclusion. A positive approach to corrective reading is one that builds on students' strengths, several of which were identified. As must be clear, these strengths are present in all students, not just in those who need corrective reading. Logically, then, these strengths should be the basis for instruction in all areas, not solely in corrective reading.

Recall that we mentioned the need for a parallel between reading instruction in content-area classrooms and in corrective reading classes. When the latter instruction is a supplement to the former, there is consistency both in the reading processes stressed and the instructional strategies utilized. For that reason, we regularly repeated the statement that "Instructional strategies are available ..." to

build on students' strengths in corrective reading (Nelson, 1980; Herber, 1978; Herber and Nelson, 1975).

These instructional strategies are demonstrably successful when integrated, in content-area classrooms, with instruction in the subject matter of the related curricula. They are equally applicable in corrective reading classes for students who truly need additional reading instruction. While concentrating on the integration of skills, while focusing on students' strengths, and while guiding the study of important concepts, reading teachers can provide corrective reading instruction that is positive in its approach, consistent with students' needs, and lasting in its value.

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